

*Achieving Excellence:
Using Faculty's Standards and
Expectations for the Dissertation
to Improve Doctoral Education*

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PLAN

- **Overview of the study**
- **Study results**
- **Next steps**

Universities

Duke University

Michigan State University

Northwestern University

Stony Brook University

Syracuse University

University of Colorado

University of Illinois

University of Kansas

University of Southern California

Disciplines

<i>Sciences</i>	<i>Social Sciences</i>	<i>Humanities</i>
Biology (6)	Economics (7)	English (7)
Physics (7)	Psychology (7)	History (9)
Engineering (6)	Sociology (7)	Philosophy (9)
Mathematics (9)		

Focus Group Protocol

- **What does it mean to make an original contribution?**
- **What does it mean to make a significant contribution?**
- **What is the purpose of the dissertation?**
- **What are the characteristics of an outstanding, very good, acceptable, unacceptable dissertation?**
- **Repeat quality exercise for the components of the dissertations**

Components of the Dissertation

- **Introduction/problem statement**
- **Literature review**
- **Theory**
- **Methods**
- **Results/analysis**
- **Discussion/conclusion**

RESULTS

- **Outstanding**
- **Very good**
- **Acceptable**
- **Unacceptable**

Outstanding

- ✓ **Original and significant**
- ✓ **Ambitious, brilliant, clear, clever, coherent, compelling, concise, creative, elegant, engaging, exciting, interesting, insightful, persuasive, sophisticated, surprising, and thoughtful**
- ✓ **Very well written and very well organized**
- ✓ **Synthetic and interdisciplinary**
- ✓ **Components are connected in a seamless way**
- ✓ **Exhibits mature, independent thinking**
- ✓ **Has a point of view and a strong, confident, independent, and authoritative voice**
- ✓ **Asks new questions or addresses an important question or problem**

Outstanding (continued)

- ✓ Clearly states the problem and why it is important
- ✓ Displays a deep understanding of a massive amount of complicated literature
- ✓ Exhibits command and authority over the material
- ✓ Argument is focused, logical, rigorous, and sustained
- ✓ Is theoretically sophisticated and shows a deep understanding of theory
- ✓ Has a brilliant research design
- ✓ Uses or develops new tools, methods, approaches, or new types of analyses
- ✓ Is thoroughly researched
- ✓ Data are rich and come from multiple sources

Outstanding (continued)

- ✓ **Analysis is comprehensive, complete, sophisticated, and convincing**
- ✓ **Results are significant**
- ✓ **Conclusion ties the whole thing together**
- ✓ **Is publishable in top-tier journals**
- ✓ **Is of interest to a larger community and changes the way people think**
- ✓ **Pushes the discipline's boundaries and opens new areas for research**

Very Good

- ✓ **Solid**
- ✓ **Well written and well organized**
- ✓ **Has some original ideas, insights, and observations, but is less original, significant, ambitious, interesting, and exciting than outstanding**
- ✓ **Has a good question or problem that tends to be small and traditional**
- ✓ **Is the next step in a research program (good normal science)**
- ✓ **Shows understanding and mastery of the subject matter**
- ✓ **Argument is strong, comprehensive, and coherent**
- ✓ **Research is well executed**

Very Good (continued)

- ✓ **Demonstrates (technical) competence**
- ✓ **Uses appropriate, standard theory, methods, and techniques**
- ✓ **Obtains solid, expected results/answers**
- ✓ **Misses opportunities to completely explore interesting issues and connections**
- ✓ **Makes a modest contribution to the field but does not open it up**

Acceptable

- ✓ **Workman-like**
- ✓ **Demonstrates (technical) competence**
- ✓ **Shows the ability to do research**
- ✓ **Is not very original or significant**
- ✓ **Is not interesting, exciting, or surprising**
- ✓ **Displays little creativity, imagination, or insight**
- ✓ **Writing is pedestrian and plodding**
- ✓ **Structure and organization are weak**
- ✓ **Project is narrow in scope**
- ✓ **Question or problem is not exciting – is often highly derivative or an extension of advisor's work**

Acceptable (continued)

- ✓ **Displays a narrow understanding of the field**
- ✓ **Literature review is adequate -- knows the literature but is not critical of it or does not discuss what is important**
- ✓ **Can sustain an argument, but argument is not imaginative, complex, or convincing**
- ✓ **Theory is understood at a simple level and is minimally to competently applied to the problem**
- ✓ **Uses standard methods**
- ✓ **Analysis is unsophisticated – does not explore all possibilities and misses connections**
- ✓ **Results are predictable and not exciting**
- ✓ **Makes a small contribution**

Unacceptable

- ✓ Is poorly written
- ✓ Has spelling and grammatical errors
- ✓ Presentation is sloppy
- ✓ Contains errors or mistakes
- ✓ Plagiarizes or deliberately misreads or misuses sources
- ✓ Does not understand basic concepts, processes, or conventions of the discipline
- ✓ Lacks careful thought
- ✓ Question or problem is trivial, weak, unoriginal, or already solved
- ✓ Does not understand or misses relevant literature

Unacceptable (continued)

- ✓ **Argument is weak, inconsistent, self-contradictory, unconvincing, or invalid**
- ✓ **Theory is missing, wrong, or not handled well**
- ✓ **Methods are inappropriate or incorrect**
- ✓ **Data are flawed, wrong, false, fudged, or misinterpreted**
- ✓ **Analysis is wrong, inappropriate, incoherent, or confused**
- ✓ **Results are obvious, already known, unexplained, or misinterpreted**
- ✓ **Interpretation is unsupported or exaggerated**
- ✓ **Does not make a contribution**

Some Dimensions of the Components

Introduction	Literature Review	Theory
<ul style="list-style-type: none">•problem statement•research question•motivation•context•summary of findings•importance of the findings•roadmap/overview	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•comprehensive•command of the literature•contextualization of the problem•selective•synthetic•analytical•thematic	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•appropriate•understood•aligns with the question•shows comprehension of the theory's<ul style="list-style-type: none">• strengths• limitations

Dimensions (continued)

Methods	Results/ Analysis	Discussion/ Conclusion
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •appropriate •described in detail •align with the question and the theory •demonstrates understanding of the methods' advantages and disadvantages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •appropriate • align with the question and hypotheses •sophisticated •iterative •amount and quality of data or information is: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - sufficient –well presented –intelligently interpreted 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •summary of findings •perspective on findings •refers back to the introduction •ties everything together •strengths and weaknesses •implications and applications •future directions

NEXT STEPS

- Refine performance expectations
- Create rubrics
- Share rubrics with students upon entry to their programs
- Use rubrics
 - Formatively at the individual level
 - Formatively and summatively at the program level



Making^{the} **Implicit** **Explicit**

CREATING PERFORMANCE EXPECTATIONS
FOR THE DISSERTATION

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